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Roots

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Bhopal, India, 1995

It is men who have mischaracterized nature as maternal, trees as giving; there are certain dead women who know better. One such dead woman inhabits the vast fig tree in the center of the courtyard of the house. She skitters up the drop roots and gnaws on the branches—I've seen the bite marks. During nights when the moon is yellow, she will sit back on her haunches among the leathery green leaves and screech at the scrape of stars against the sky—I've heard her shriek louder than even the monsoon. She dances to the wailing winds, the howling of the stray dogs, and the strangled heartbeat of the tree itself—a guttural sound, like the drone of a *tabla*. Dead women need sustenance; I could not tell you why. Yet, this is what the tree refuses her, so she will hunt for it herself.

Samir's mother was menstruating in the other room—the room that he was not allowed to go in. As a consequence, Samir was bored and hungry; an utterly pathetic state of being for an American teenager visiting his abso-fucking-lutely *loaded* extended family for a sweltering Indian summer vacation. His mother could not cook him anything lest she pollute his food—which, *Indians, man*—and his father was out with his brothers, hunting deer. The hunting party didn't have to go very far—just a short, picturesque drive beyond the edge of his grandfather's sprawling estate, and there was the Van Vihar Forest. As a national park, its fauna was legally protected. However, Samir's *dada* used to be a strongman for the reigning political party in Bhopal; allowances were made, rules were ground down as easily as cardamom cloves. It was all wink wink, nudge nudge.

The American teenager stood at his window and watched the servants' children playing cricket on the packed dirt floor of the courtyard. The yard was encircled protectively by a micro-neighborhood of small clay houses, each equipped with a comfortable A.C. unit and sturdy, shingled roofs. In the center rose a massive banyan that began from everywhere and ended everywhere. Gnarled roots dropped from thick, spidery branches, which wandered away from the vast main trunk, twisting and turning before finally tapering off in leathery green

leaves. Samir could tell that the children would not go near the labyrinthine boughs of the banyan. Perhaps, Samir guessed, due to some superstitious or sacred boundary. Once, their cricket ball had shot off into the shadows of the canopy's reach. The bowler—a pretty girl about his age, with long black hair braided into two schoolgirl plaits, in a simple yet clean white *salwar kameez*, shrugged with a grimace before picking up an old, worn ball they kept as a spare.

Yes. Samir knew what to do now. One of the goals he had set for his summer vacation was to learn how to play cricket—the only sport his father was intensely fanatic for, believing it was inimitable in all respects. If Samir could play with him, it might become their brown family equivalent of playing catch with a baseball. Samir would retrieve the ball from where it had vanished to, return it to the bowler with a sheepish chuckle; the bowler would smile shyly but encouragingly up at him, and he would be welcomed into the game.

Samir quickly shuffled his feet into his *chappals* and bounded out the house, following the boundary wall of the manor to approach the tree from a side that was invisible to the other children; he didn't want to make premature eye contact with them before he had accomplished the first step of his plan. The boundary wall was bone white and lined on top with broken shards of glass and rusty nails that had been pushed into the concrete, makeshift barbed wire to keep out intruders. Samir grazed its surface lightly with his fingertips; first idly, and then nervously, to remain grounded as he approached the looming banyan and felt an inexplicable lurching in his stomach.

It was—

It was just a tree.

And yet it leered. Contained as it was in the center of the yard, it was horribly unavoidable, IMAX, filling every corner of his vision. Visible, probably, he realized with a jolt, from nearly every location on the estate. Its branches seemed ready to grab him and pull him into the coffin of its suffocated trunk if he came within range.

No.

It was just a *tree*.

Samir stumbled into its reach—nothing happened. He inhaled a fortifying breath and immediately coughed. Something was rotting close by—not sickly sweet enough to be fruit, not rancid enough to be flesh. He cast his gaze around for the ball, even as his hopes for finding it sank. The minefield of roots on the ground below were dark and unnavigable, grabbing onto his ankles and tripping him.

Above him, glossy green leaves shuddered with quick movement. Samir felt horrible knowledge trickle down his spine like a lone drop of water—there was an aspect about the tree that was watching, cold and evil. No, no, Samir thought deliriously. It's a monkey. He heard the soft *pitter-patter* of feet on wood.

He stumbled away—rustling grew louder—and he was yanked out of the shadows abruptly, dragged away from the tree, and dropped against the boundary wall by the driver *waala*. He yelped, a high, embarrassing noise that he hoped the bowler girl didn't hear, before rapidly twisting his head to see the familiar, sun-wrinkled face of the manservant who was his grandfather's chauffeur and the bowler girl's father.

"Never go near that tree. Don't touch it. Don't even piss on it," the driver said in gruff Hindi, grasping Samir's slight shoulders with a strong, callused grip. "Seven years ago, one of the servant women—the clothes washer—committed suicide, hanged herself from one of the branches. There's been a *chudail* that lives up in the tree ever since."

"What is a *chudail*?" Samir asked, American tongue curling uncertainly on the retroflex.

"Vitch," The driver responded in English, bushy eyebrows raised. "Dirty voman that died. Stay away from the banyan tree." The driver gave Samir a pointed, cautionary glance—frowning those great eyebrows—before stalking off to the servant children, chastising the bowler girl for playing cricket and getting her clothes messy instead of helping her mother.

After doling out a quick slap—Samir jumped, winced—he headed back to his station at the driveway.

The girl, alone now, for the other children had scampered away when they saw an angry adult approaching, stood silently. She faced away from Samir, who watched as he caught his breath. She tilted her head up to the sky, and then slightly angled her head so she was looking up at the tree, a pristinely blank expression on her face. Her profile was limned gracefully by the light of the setting sun, and he could see, perhaps, the glint of a tear. In the delicacy of the moment, Samir heard a quiet whisper, a murmur of pity that he could only assume was meant for the girl.

But something happened—changed—snapped—because, she suddenly—her head turned then—impossibly—bones creaking, neck rotating slowly, like a ballerina in a toy music box, skin bunching up around the base of her jaw. She wore a jagged rictus grin, knife cut and strained at the corners, fixed tightly on a drawn face. Thin ribbons of blood unfurled from her eyes, which glimmered reflectively like an animal's. Her gaze snapped to him. He screamed then, a primitive sound that did not echo.

“Whooooooooooooooooo aaaaaaammmmm I,” she wailed delightedly. Samir ran without looking back, back into the mansion, into the room that he was not allowed in, leaping into his mother's arms. The bowler girl stared after him, curious and blinking, wondering what on Earth had terrified the American boy so.

This piece is an excerpt from a longer short story.